

22/06/2011

By Richard Smith: ISS Seminar on Zimbabwe

Your excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, comrades and friends

Let me begin by thanking the Institute for Security Studies for affording all of us the opportunity to meet together to discuss these critical issues, and at such an auspicious time.

When I say auspicious I don't only mean this evening's lunar eclipse – often seen as some form of foreboding - a time of beginnings, of endings, of exposure and of major change, mistakenly seen as such many might argue,

But Be that as it may auspicious too in that tomorrow is June 16th . Youth Day the constituency most often the more active members of the civil society on which I intend to focus my attention

It is fitting that we should meet to reflect urgently and with the appropriate amount of gravity and seriousness on the most recent outcomes of the SADC Summit and the deliberations of our regions leadership.

It is important in the context of a discussion on civil society and Zimbabwe to remember that at least one of the reasons that we are sitting here today is because of the work of that civil society.

Even more so when one considers that we are meeting here, in Pretoria, the political heart of South Africa's complex politics.

That this could not have happened 20 years ago is directly linked to the contribution civil society has to make, and the potential of their power to bring change.

This remembering of the role and contribution of civil society must extend also to a recognition that we are here because the situation in Zimbabwe has been brought firmly under the spotlight.

What happens there is as much about the broader dynamics of the region, of African governance as a whole and of the geopolitical forces that affect all international relations as it is about the specifics of Zimbabwe itself.

And this is the case, for a reason – not because Zimbabwe has oil, not even because of the diamonds, but because of the tireless and relentless efforts of mainly civil society actors to turn the spotlight and keep the spotlight on what is happening just north of the border.

There is little doubt, across the continent, civil society is vibrant and thriving. Threatened in places, curtailed in others, but nonetheless the undisputed catalyst for political change across the SADC region and beyond.

It is this ability that we have to give expression to the fundamental Right to Organise that lies at the core of who civil society are, and why within the bigger picture they are so important. The RIGHT TO ORGANISE is a cornerstone of democracy, and like it or not SADC appears to have become clearer on just how seriously it is willing to take any challenges to the broader agenda of the democratisation project.

While some will argue that this democracy is little more than an attempt to stabilize economies and protect investment interests as we open up our markets ,it

does nonetheless present opportunities for civil society that can enable an ongoing effort to build and strengthen voices that unquestionably represent a range of diverse and important needs and aspirations.

The sheer range of types of civic contribution in and around Zimbabwe speaks strongly to just precisely how diverse diversity can be.

It is helpful perhaps in trying to understand and analyse these groups to cluster them in terms of their intentions and agendas.

The most prolific groups, and the ones we often think of first are the classic –

The Watchdog.

Not surprisingly, and indeed in keeping with the usually wary and often suspicious perspective governments often have of this group within civil society, it is this group from whom we tend to hear the most.

The watchdog has an important role – exposing transgressions of the law and of a moral code to which the watchdog rigidly adheres, driven by a particular understanding of the relationship between the state and civil society.

Watchdogs are generally better resourced, and often their agendas are developed in opposition to events and in criticism of the agendas of others.

Watchdogs are dependent on information, and distributing it, and so understandably often clash with authorities over issues of access and control.

They drum up support and influence public thinking on what those in positions of power are on about. And they deal in the power that information has to draw patterns and uncover intentions.

Not far behind in popularity, and often quoted in the news and on opinion type television programmes, are the analysts of the Think Tanks. Here the institutes and foundations produce research and policy briefs that feed directly into public debate and even sometimes directly into policies themselves.

Diversity finds true expression amongst the institutes, each driven by its own particular paradigm, presenting views and opinions that derive their legitimacy from the soundness of their analytical foundation and their research credentials.

Civil society has its own divisions and schisms – none more so than those between the think tanks and the third important grouping – the social mobilisers. Here the social movements, the faith based groupings, the cultural networks and the assemblies build popular support for change. Changes in the direct material conditions with which they are confronted, and in support of the struggles of others, recognised as microcosms of the bigger drive for social transformation.

Under resourced, poorly organised and sometimes lacking in longer term change alternatives social movements are underestimated, and all too easily dismissed by those in power.

Their potential to bring change is usually dependent on their ability to link up with and combine the popular support they commandeer with the skills, strategies and tactics of the fourth civic group – The Organisers,

These groups of trade unions, civics and community based organisations work to give direction and focus to the notions of solidarity and the power of collective action. Organisers can bring stakeholders together for dialogue and consensus building problem solving and through their forms of organisation can often take action those impacts directly on those they seek to influence.

This influencing role is made more powerful when used in combination or with the support of the Legal Rights groups, the fifth and perhaps in the case of Zimbabwe most brave and courageous form of civic grouping.

Defending the rights of those who fall victim of a corrupt and biased legal system and demanding justice, it is often the lawyers and advocates that see things through and convert what should be done into what must.

It is important at this stage to recognise that it not any single cluster of these activities and roles that have brought pressure to bear, or that can claim easy victories – no civic initiative alone will ever bring the changes that are required. Rather it is in their combined impact that the deeper contribution lies.

The much talked about efforts of civil society in blowing the whistle on the arms cache first spotted in the Durban Harbour, the refusal by trade unions to unload the crate, the legal battle that ensued to successfully prevent the docking of the ship and the organisations that followed its path around the coast and into the murky waters of Angola provide a useful example of this cooperation.

The coordination between Zimbabwean Civics and their Solidarity counterparts to draw attention to the rise in levels of violence provides another. Bringing into the public domain the dangers that the de facto military takeover of state power in Zimbabwe has for all of us, and of the urgency with which this fragile balance of power needs to be addressed has been an essential and extraordinarily useful addition.

At the recent SADC Summit the combined effect of the statements issued, the presence outside of civic voices and the strong relationships between those inside the summit and the civic reps who now engage at this level with confidence and

skill, are testimony too to just how far civil society has come over the past few years.

This recognition of the value of a collective effort is what informs the agenda of the sixth and final grouping. This group forms part of civil society, and may often even carry out activities and engage in processes that overlap and support the agendas of many of the groups already outlined. But they carry too a different agenda, one which contributes directly to the mediation and negotiation process around which the change in Zimbabwe is centred. This group of Enablers relates differently to the powers of politics and statehood. They are usually balancing a fine line between their roots in the civic movement and their actions, which often entail building the capacity and providing support to the very targets that the Watchdogs intentionally remain so distant from. Enablers are also often coordinators, seeking to unify disparate voices behind a common position, and to galvanise efforts behind a common agenda of change and a shared vision of the future.

The depth of involvement of civil society in the processes that surrounded the summit last weekend, and to the very formation of the Government of National Unity, the signing of the GPA and the constitutional, legal and other key reform processes that will form part of the agreed roadmap are evidence enough of the value and potential of their contribution.

While many will point to the exclusion of much of civil society from the senior level political processes, this is now as much the result of the elitist nature of these discussions as it is any deliberate attempt to exclude or marginalize the civics in particular.

Civil society groupings have commented widely on the change in approach towards engagement from the current mediation team, Civic groups are being consulted

and used by political parties and by different interest groups – to gather information, to solicit opinion and to add weight and influence to agendas.

While the wariness remains there are increasing numbers of policy makers and politicians that see the potential benefit of having civil society on your side. In avoiding naivety this must be tempered by an acknowledgement that for many of these this acceptance is as much in resignation to the inevitability of the need to engage rather than any genuine or heartfelt embracing of civics in general.

Nonetheless there are opportunities, and civil society are making the most of them.

In as much as the outcome of the Summit may represent a significant shift on the part of SADC towards the less democratic members it contains, and indeed the more outspoken condemnation of violence is in itself an important milestone – the communiqué itself will still be endlessly debated and interpreted and reinterpreted. Its real value, as in all these matters will lie in the manner and extent to which it is implemented.

It may be significant that the communiqué fails to mention the roadmap explicitly, it may be significant that the summit notes the contents of the Livingstone meeting instead of endorsing it. But in the end these are words, and the deeds of SADC will be a lot more telling than anything that is said.

Most significant perhaps is the urging by SADC that the members of the Troika should appoint their representatives forthwith to join and strengthen the Joint Monitoring and Implementation Committee. JOMIC has become the new site of struggle – an internal mechanism, a Zimbabwean mechanism, and now also for the first time a domestic mechanism in which the regional body has firm representation and a clear agenda.

There have been long and repeated calls by civil society for SADC to engage directly in providing technical support and oversight within the systems and structures of the Zimbabwean state. This has long and repeatedly been rejected as an invasive intervention that violates the principle of sovereignty. It seems that at last this debate has been concluded, and the principle agreed. When and if it is necessary SADC can and will get directly involved.

The retraction of the intention to send a delegation to the US, UK and EC to build support for a lifting of sanctions and the acceptance that the preferred tactic now is one of dialogue in this regard also has value. It indicates that the sanctions debate, and the excuse of western meddling in domestic affairs no longer holds the shiny allure it used to, and the propaganda sell by date of related arguments appears to have finally expired.

Less spoken about but equally telling is the focus on the communiqué on the context of Madagascar. The language, tone and intentions of SADC in relation to Madagascar may well also provide clues to just how serious SADC have become in their efforts to push for change.

The legal instruments referred to, the clear path to a new protected election and even the deliberate naming of those parties that have not yet initialed the roadmap demonstrate a new vigour as our regional body remains 'actively seized' with their role.

Some will argue, perhaps rightly so, that these too are just words. And that SADC lacks the political will and the muscle to bring any real pressure to bear. Certainly it appears unlikely that other forms of regional pressure will be brought to bear, be they economic, legal or military in nature. Political tools of dialogue and

persuasion, and the threat of isolation remain the only weapons that SADC has in its armoury.

Will these be sufficient to prevent a breakdown into violence, will they be enough to shift the dynamics into a genuine negotiation about power, needs and interests, will they be enough to bring the kinds of conditions so essential for a democratic transition that avoids the enormous destruction that will come with a outright descent into war.

These are questions that will only be firmly answered with the passing of time.

It appears likely though that this option, a roadmap to an election with a legitimate outcome, and that makes the GPA agenda firmer and more explicit, remains the only real opportunity available. Civics will debate the pros and cons of the new proposed constitution, the constitution may or may not even be adopted in time for an election, but either way this SADC driven path is still the most likely direction in which the process of change will unfold.

There may well be an initial resurgence of violence, and the extent of repression, the new arrests, the seizure of property, the extra judicial forms of control and the gap between the civilian and military leadership are all signs that initially at least there will be efforts by those in power to resist change.

It is here that SADC too is unable to achieve a relatively less violent transition process if it chooses to act alone. It is only in combination with civil society, with the Watchdogs, the Policy think tanks, the Social Mobilisers, the Organisers, the Legal Advocates and the Enablers, that any of the stakeholders have any chance at all.

For civil society the uncertainty over the future directly affects the form in which they will most effectively contribute. However, no matter what happens the success of these efforts will be made more effective if there is a whole lot more coordination, a more proactive set of strategies that are also long term in their intentions, and a greater attention to the need to link forms of crisis response to longer-term forms of social transformation.

There is a need, and it is urgent, for civics and civil society to find and build cooperative partnerships, to assert new forms of strategic influence and to find and support new forms of solidarity that continue to add voice and depth and direction to the inevitable process of change. Alone these efforts will be light in their effect, together they will make a difference.